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A2 Sophomore H. English

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Wanderlust

Bone-white fog pours from the grounds of the ominous castle at the top of the hill and fills the town of Vas. I try to focus on stirring the gruel in front of me, but with such a fascinating world outside my very home and my hidden stash of books at my side, it is no wonder that I cannot focus on such unimportant matters. I listen for my father but hear only the distant cawing of crows, so I reach behind the cabinet and pull out a book. Thumbing through the worn pages, I open to my favorite short story, one about a girl on a search for the elixir of life. As I scan over the familiar words, I notice the year it was written, 1600. How strange to think that such a modern piece of writing can be so mesmerizing, while everything around me seems so incredibly dull. Perhaps Vas is the most dismal place in the world, for it seems that all the imports my father buys are interesting, yet everything from the town itself is beyond boring. I long to escape the confines of my caged existence, to rove about the world.

“Ade! Just what exactly do you think you are doing?” slurs my father, struggling to close the front door behind him. I drop my book into the crack between the cabinet and the wall before he has the chance to notice my stolen treasure. He falls into his bed, knocking over a basket during his clumsy descent. “No! Actually, I know exactly what you are doing. You are wasting everything I do for you. I work all day selling and trading just to feed you awful kids, I spend all my money saving up a dowry, and I never sleep, worrying about what we are going to do with you. And you? You won’t even cook dinner without getting distracted by your stupid little fantasies. I swear to God I will build a wall to block your view of the castle if it distracts you that much. You have to be the most doltish, repelling, horrid little girl to enter this town and *I* happen to be the one who got stuck with you! I mean you are an absolute-” Before he has a chance to finish, I storm out the door, hoping to never come back.

I start scuffing down the dirt road that runs through the center of town when I see a strange woman walking toward me. I pause to observe her more closely. Her wardrobe marks her instantly as an outsider. She is perhaps one of the most beautiful people I have ever seen, despite her age. She has neither a hunched spine nor gnarled fingers; she is no hard laborer. Her skin lacks the deep wrinkles of one well acquainted with the sun. A velvet hat adorned with a large, white feather tops her dark hair. As I ponder what kind of bird the feather is from and what sorts of journeys it went on, I hardly notice that the woman has begun to speak to me.

“Young girl, what is your name?” she croons while beckoning me over with her well-manicured hands.

“I…I am Ade Jakab,” I stutter, my eyes downcast and my foot unconsciously drawing arcs in the loose soil.

“Ah, unmarried,” she notes, seemingly excited by this fact. “And what family do you have?” she enquires.

“Only my brother Péter, my sisters Anna and Katalin, and my father, Tar János. Why do you ask such questions of me, ma’am?” I mumble, nerves barring my ability to dictate coherently.

“I’m delighted you asked, and I if you listen for a moment, it shall all make sense. But first, let me introduce myself. I am Ilona Jó. I come from the court of Countess Erzsébet Báthory. I came to town on my weekly trip to send a donation to the Church of Wittenberg with a secondary mission, to find a new employee for Countess Báthory. The Countess is looking for a seamstress to serve her daughter, Katalin Drugeth de Homonnay,” she concludes, flashing a wide grin and shifting her weight to lean against her ornate staff.

“With all due respect Miss Ilona Jó, I cannot understand why you are speaking to me if you are looking for a seamstress for the Countess’ daughter. If you seek to imply that I am eligible for the job, let me warn you, I have very little talent with sewing, certainly not enough to meet the Countess’ standards. I have no great skills nor am I the most personable girl,” I tremble, reciting the speech my father has given me countless times and that I have begun to believe.

“Do not concern yourself with experience, dear Ade,” encourages Ilona Jó. “I sense that you are a hard worker and persistence pays off in the court of Erzsébet Báthory. You are also not yet tied down with a husband, making you a wonderful candidate. Please consider my proposal and take this position,” she coos, her request a perfect balance between desperate and demanding. As I reflect on her generous offer I glance over my shoulder at my desolate little dwelling. I imagine my father, still in his drunken rage, kicking over all the chairs and cursing my mother for leaving us so soon, cursing the burden he was left with.

After a moment of hesitation, I reply, “I accept your offer. I am ready to serve Countess Báthory.”

“A wise decision. I think you will find your experience at Castle Sárvár to be utterly thrilling. Of course, your earnings will be sent directly to your father to pay your dowry when you are finally ready to be married. Now, before we depart you should run home and collect whatever you would like to bring to the Castle, as this will be your last opportunity for quite some time. You will be presented with a uniform upon your arrival but if you have any personal items you need I recommend you grab them now,” she remarks, raising her high wrought cane and beginning to amble back up the hill.

“No!” I interject. I cannot bear the thought of glaring into my father’s beady eyes even once more. “I mean, that will not be necessary miss. I am ready to go forth immediately.”

“Very well, eager girl,” she grins. We turn and begin trekking up the mild slope to the top of the hill. As we march slowly into the dense fog, I cannot help but consider how drastically I have just altered the course of my life. Have I saved myself from my father’s harsh words and harsher punishments, from another ugly scar? Or have I prevented a happy marriage to a handsome young man who could have marched into town tomorrow? Worry washes over me, causing a heavy weight in the bottom of my stomach, as if I have swallowed a burning hot rock. I begin to consider the worst scenarios; images of my father kicking over furniture flash into my brain. Poor little Péter, Anna, and Katalin will be forced to fend for themselves against my father, chicks under the watch of a fox. But I must not concern myself with their fates; they should not be the ropes binding me to the misery of Vas. This may very well be the closest I come to a storybook ending. Working for the Countess could be my only chance. Before I mull over this topic further I realize the ground is leveling out, the castle is growing nearer, and we have reached some sort of river, this must be the source of the fog.

“Welcome to the grounds of Castle Sárvar,” sings out Ilona Jó. “Fickzó will be arriving any moment to ferry us across”

“Any moment? I have been waiting far too long already,” seethes a raspy voice from behind a tidy row of poplar trees. As he pushes himself through a tight gap in the plants, I leap backward, in shock at what I see. Though the boy is young, hardly older than myself, he has the body of an ailing old man. A contorted back that sets his head level with his chest, deeply gnarled fingers, protruding forehead, eyes bulging out to a seemingly impossible point, it is no wonder I have never seen this boy in town. Even a short stroll through Vas would earn him the title of “monster” or “demon” and possibly even a witch trial. I try to hide my shock by throwing a slight smile in his direction.

“What? Something funny, girl?” he rasps, dragging a small canoe out from behind the trees and pushing it into the water.

Before I can defend myself, Ilona Jó chides, “Now Fickzó, we must be kind to the newest servants. They provide a great service to our Countess. And we know that the Countess needs more help than ever now that she must run the castle without Ferenc.”

“Yes, yes, just get in the boat,” he fumes while precariously lowering himself into the craft. Once Ilona Jó and I safely settle ourselves into the boat, he stands, pulls his dark cloak over his head, and starts rowing. His shadowy hood billows in the cool January winds, his arms swiftly rowing despite his crippled frame. We soundlessly cut through the dark, infinitely deep waters. I glance down to find my reflection in the black moat and instead see the faces of the hundreds of people who have crossed these waters before me. They stare morosely back at me, their dark eyes seemingly piercing into my eternal soul. I suppose the mind does goes to strange places in times of such high tension.

Fickzó pulls the canoe up to shore and steadies it as we hop out. We tread toward the immense, white castle and I turn to ascend the grand steps of the front entrance.

“No, no,” criticizes Ilona Jó, “that is the entrance for guests. We must use the service entrance.” The deformed boy snickers and I, blushing, catch one final glimpse of the war themed frescoes in the main hall through the windows before quickly trotting down the stairs. We circle around to the back of the seemingly never-ending castle and enter through a much less impressive entryway. I let out a small gasp upon entering a room more clean and elegant than the church itself. This appears to be an entire room dedicated to dishwashing alone. I can only imagine what kind of wealth the Countess must posses to have an entire room for dishwashing.

“Excuse me one moment,” Ilona Jó smiles, turning and striding over to a large man leaning against a door. Fickzó slinks off down a long corridor, shooting me one last disdainful look before disappearing into the shadows. The man Ilona Jó speaks to has a wild look about him: sharp teeth, hairy, unkempt face, wide frame, shaggy hair, and the slightest dribble of drool emerging from the corner of his mouth. He does not talk, but rather growls rapid, harsh words. After he barks one final command at Ilona Jó, she turns and frantically strides over to me.

“The Countess desires to see you immediately,” she orders, no longer the calm and collected woman of just a moment ago. As I attempt to protest she interjects, “If the Countess demands your immediate attention, I highly recommend you give her precisely that. Now, she is waiting for you just down the staircase behind Drabont. She has been awaiting the arrival of a new servant for quite some time so if I were in your position, I would run to her quickly and try not to cross her in this impatient mood. Best of luck,” she sighs as she nudges me toward the door. As I pass through the doorway, Drabont, the savage man guarding the door, grunts and watches as I enter the dark stairwell.

I have joined a new world. This world has no heat, no light, nothing to comfort me on my descent into the unknown. For a brief moment there is total nothingness. The only guide I have on this pitch-black staircase is muscle memory reminding me where the steps should be. I am nearly convinced that the sound has been sucked out of the room entirely until my foot hits the first step and sends a crashing echo into the cavernous room. My heart skips a beat and then pumps at double time, as if to make up for it. My stomach becomes so white hot that it risks burning a hole through my body and falling out. I try to take the next step more slowly and though it is more muffled than before, it is an obvious aberration in the silence of the room. I decide that my chance of approaching silently is already destroyed so I take the rest of the stairs quickly and without concern for noise. As I reach the bottom of the steps, the glow of candles illuminates the scene before me.

The circular chamber is bordered by hundreds of small candles, their flames dancing and swaying in the drafty room. On the opposite corner of the room is a large, oval mirror. The face contained in the mirror is that of Erzsébet Báthory, who is standing, facing the mirror with her back turned to me. If she is aware of my presence she does not reveal it. I try to make a small noise to alert her of my company but sound evades my dry and trembling mouth. My face is filling with heat so quickly that I fear I will fog up the mirror from across the ten-foot chamber. As I try to control my convulsive quivering, I admire Countess Báthory’s ornate maroon dress, its gold details reflecting the dim candle glow. She is not moving; she does not even appear to be breathing. The only object in this room that proves to me I am looking at real life, not a still painting, are the jumping flames of the candles. The tension in the air is so thick I feel like it will crush my wispy frame into pieces before I have the chance to introduce myself.

I stand, waiting for her to acknowledge my presence. I stand for years, or at least, what I feel are years. I expect something from her, some movement eventually. Even a blink. But nothing. She just stares into the mirror as my stomach glows more molten hot by the minute. I consider approaching her, but instead I do what I am now well accustomed to, I wait in silence.

“Am I pretty?” she whispers, a manic smile spreading across her previously stony countenance. She does not turn to face me but she grins at my reflection in the mirror, her eyes growing wider and her breath getting shallower by the second. She freezes for a moment, scowling at the reflections in the glass. As quickly as she froze she starts again, diving headfirst into the mirror. If I thought my footsteps coming down the stairs were loud, this is infinitely louder. I leap backward, hoping to land anywhere but this chamber. The mirror shatters and sends jagged shards of glass to every corner of the room. I am not sure which explodes more violently, the mirror or Countess Báthory, because as the glass tumbles to every corner of the room, she lets out a piercing war cry and scoops up a particularly jagged shard. Wielding the glass like a dagger, the Countess pivots to face me and slowly marches in my direction. Step by step I back up, but the moment I feel the cold, brick wall against my back is the moment I consider the possibility that I will not survive this meeting with my new employer.

“You didn’t answer my question, DEARY!” Báthory jabbers, her eyes reaching the size of saucers as she grows nearer to my trembling body. “Then again, you probably are not the best authority on beauty, are you now, DARLING?” she hoots, reaching her arm out and stroking my scar with her bony pointer finger. “Well, I guess there is one quick way to settle this,” she cackles, “We could make sure I am not the most repulsive girl in the room.” She constricts her fingers around my throat and pushes me firmly against the wall. With her other hand she presses the sharpest edge of the mirror against my unscarred cheek. The glass pushes forcefully against my skin, concentrating pressure on my delicate face until finally the tension is too great and the skin snaps, opening a wound and allowing the glass to pierce my flesh. She glides it carelessly down my face, drawing lines and swirls deep into my cheek. The pain shoots far into my skin, and I feel it double as I recall the first time my face was slashed. I was nine, and it had been less than a day since my mother had passed while delivering Péter. My father knew only one way to alleviate the pain and after hours of drinking, he stumbled home in a state of rage. Papa found my face to be a suitable target for his anger and he considered the kitchen knife to be a perfect tool for the job.

I cannot tell which hurts worse, the memory of receiving my first scar or the pain of the Countess moving the glass to my chest. I try to lift my arms, but sheer agony seems to have strapped them at my sides. I wish my mind had frozen with my limbs so I would not have to witness such a horrific crime against my own body. I try not to look down at the Countess’ work on my stomach, but I am aware of warm blood dripping down my thigh and pooling up on my foot. I do not want to give her the satisfaction of hearing me scream so I bite my lip, adding to the river of blood pouring down my body.

Impatient with my lack of reaction, Báthory reaches into a deep pocket of her dress and pulls out some sort of elaborate glove. As she tightens the straps, I realize that the glove has metallic claws fixed to the fingertips.

“Ah, admiring my accessory?” she laughs, “yes Ferenc always knew how to make a lady happy. Here, have a closer look!” She reaches the glove out toward me and suddenly flicks her wrist, sending the blade-like claws gliding across my fragile collar. As blood begins to flow quickly from my neck, she smiles, “Oh! Sorry to disappoint you, but it looks as if I might have to end our little game early. Oh well, maybe another time! I have guests coming for dinner and I would hate to keep them waiting. I guess I might as well finish this up quickly. But look at you, little thing, you’ll bleed out in no time.”

As I lose track of how many times the claws grace my skin, I also lose track of the pain they cause me. I may be lying on the floor, I can no longer tell. A ring of blood frames my vision and in the center is the Countess’ face, smiling with glee unlike any I have ever seen. Her childlike joy reminds me of my own siblings, the siblings that I never said goodbye to. The siblings that may never know what happened to me. I feel a sharp stabbing in my stomach but cannot tell whether it is a blade or guilt. I begin regretting every moment I ever loathed my siblings, every time I locked them out in the rain so I could read in peace, every whipping they ever received when I blamed them for my mistakes. I would do anything to go back and kiss them goodbye.

The room shifts out of focus and the Countess’ face grows dimmer, slowly fading out. Pleasant warmth encompasses me and I feel myself relax. Báthory’s face starts morphing. Her hair grows longer and becomes light brown. Her face looses its roundness, becoming thin and pale. Her lips become lighter and form into a gentle smile. I know her.

“Hello, mother.”

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Attribution of Research

1. “A woman more creepy than vampire legends.” *Daily Telegraph*. Sydney, New South Wales, Australia: 7 Aug. 2010. Print

* Girls were lured in with the offer of payment
* Báthory ran both the estate and a torture shop once her husband died
* Báthory tortured her servant girls, often to the point of death

2. Craft, Kimberly L. *Infamous Lady: The True Story of Countess Erzsébet Báthory.* United States: 2009. Print.

* Fog often surrounded Báthory’s castle because it had so much water around it
* Báthory’s castle was located in Vas
* Countess Báthory made regular donations to the Church of Wittenburg so the clergy would not punish her for killing so many girls
* Ilona Jó told girls that they would be working for the Countess’ daughter, Katalin Drugeth de Homonnay
* Ilona Jó hired single young girls ages 10-14
* The castle was surrounded by a moat the size of a river
* One of Báthory’s cohorts was named Fickzó
* Fickzó was physically deformed and is often described as an Igor type character
* Báthory’s employees had to navigate across the moat- some even lived in houses located on islands within the moat
* Báthory’s husband was named Ferenc Nádasdy
* Ferenc died January 4, 1604
* Castle Sárvar was a large, white structure build by the Nádasdy family
* Báthory always kept an armed guard posted when she committed acts of torture
* Báthory’s usual armed guard was named Drabont
* Báthory had a specific chamber dedicated to torture
* There were mirrors in every room of Báthory’s castle as she was obsessed with her appearance
* The Countess would stare into mirrors for hours
* Báthory occasionally smashed every mirror in sight out of rage
* The Countess had a glove with metal claws attached to it for torture
* Ferenc brought Erzsébet various torture devices, including her claws
* Báthory conducted her torture around dinner time as evening entertainment

3. Craft, Kimberly L. *The Private Letters of Countess Erzsébet Báthory.* United States: 2011. Print.

* Ilona Jó was one of Countess Báthory’s cohorts in her murder schemes
* Ilona Jó offered girls jobs as seamstresses and nurses
* One of Báthory’s main slaughter sites was Castle Sárvar

4. “Hungarian Names 101.” *Heraldry,* 6 Apr. 2002. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://heraldry.sca.org/

laurel/names/magyarnames1012.html>.

* Ade was one of the top ten Hungarian girl names of the early 1600s and Jakab was a common last name
* Married girls had the suffix –ne on their last names
* When people of the same village had the same first name, they would adopt adjectives that described them. Tar means bald.

5. *Hungary…In Pictures.* Minneapolis: *Learner Publications*, 1993. Print.

* Foxes are native to Hungary
* Poplar trees are native to Hungary

6. McKay, John P, Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler. *A History of Western Society.* Boston: *Houghton Mifflin,* 1991. Print.

* The peasant diet was 80% grain, and mostly gruel for the poorest serfs
* Fathers had to save up a dowry to give to their daughter’s future husband
* Arranged marriages were commonplace in Eastern Europe in the 1600s
* Frescoes were a popular form of art in Eastern Europe in the 1600s
* In the Holy Roman Empire, people had the same religion as their ruler. Thus, if Báthory was Protestant, the people in her land would be too.